

THE INDYPENDENT

Issue #179, September 20 – October 19, 2012
A FREE PAPER FOR FREE PEOPLE



Stacy Oliver, a student at New York University.

Generation Debt IS COLLEGE STILL WORTH IT?

coverage begins, p8

ASHLEY MARINACCIO



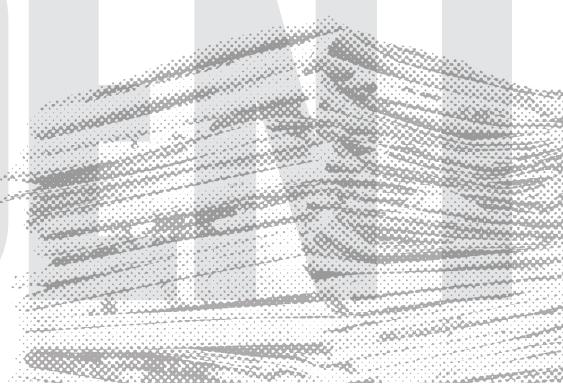
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community calendar

SEPT-OCT

UPCOMING EVENTS

WED, OCT 3 • 7:30-9:30pm

8-SESSION CLASS BEGINS: INTERMEDIATE SPANISH.

Led by Jose Rosa, an immigrant from El Salvador with 15 years of teaching experience, students will increase their vocabulary and learn to express sophisticated ideas through the use of revolutionary poetry, literature and music of Central and South America.

Tuition: \$275

THU, OCT 4 • 6-7:30pm

8-SESSION CLASS BEGINS: MARXISM AND ECOLOGY — ANALYZING THE ROOTS OF THE CRISIS & ENVISIONING SOLUTIONS.

This class will examine the capitalist roots of the multi-faceted ecological crisis via a Marxist economic and political analysis. Led by Chris Williams, a long-time environmental activist, author and adjunct professor at Pace University.

Sliding scale: \$75-\$95

MON, OCT 15 • 7:30-9:30pm

10-SESSION CLASS BEGINS: REVOLUTION — MEXICO 1910-2010.

This is an ongoing study group led by Michael Lardner, Rust Gilbert, Gerardo Renique and others. Participants can join at any time. Each term takes on a specific facet of anti-capitalist and often socialist revolutionary dynamics.

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66 Leroy St.

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Uptown Sister's Books
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203 Parkside Ave.

QUEENS

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Verb Café
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Pillow Café
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Pacific Street Library
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Outpost Café
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Blackbird Café
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Tales of a Student Loan Survivor

BY JOHN TARLETON

**\$124.90.
PAYMENT DUE: AUGUST 1.**

That's how much I owed Chemical Bank of New York for my July 1991 student loan payment. I already had four other months of these bills that I hadn't paid yet. Looking ahead, I owed the same sum every month for what appeared to be the rest of the eternity. Default seemed inevitable.

This was a moment I had pushed out of my mind from the time I signed my first student loan forms five years earlier at the age of 19. I was carrying almost \$15,000 in debt (or, about \$25,000 in present-day money). My loans made it possible for me to earn a degree from one of the best journalism schools in the country. But a year out of college, I realized I didn't want to be a conventional journalist writing for a Midwestern daily. So, I ditched the mainstream career I had been groomed for and decided to become a vagabond, hitch-hiking and traveling across the United States and down into Latin America — reading, writing, learning a second language, listening to the stories of people I met from all walks of life.

I soon ran out of money and butted up against a double dilemma — how to earn enough dough to maintain my new itinerant lifestyle while also figuring out what to do about those pesky loans. I found myself grappling with the same mix of fear, helplessness and shame that grips millions of young people today who are overwhelmed by the student loan debts they face.

DIFFICULT CHOICES

Walking away from my debts was tempting. After all, I didn't want to live my life just to be a source of easy profits for fat cat bankers. But what would happen to my parents who were the co-signers on my loans? They were already being bombarded by calls from bill collectors who were trying to find me. And, what would become of my younger brother's chances of going to college? He had a right to live his dreams too.

My wanderings in the summer of '91 took me far up the coast of Maine to the home of the wild blueberry where I decided to become a migrant fruit picker. Growers were paying 12 cents a pound (or, \$240 a ton) for workers to scoop the berries off bushes that sprawled inches off the ground across whole fields. Fired by hopes of quick riches and bent over in the blazing sun like medieval serfs, we gathered the harvest.

The work was brutal but I found I enjoyed it and the hard-scrabble men and women who were drawn to such a setting. By the end of the month, I was caught up on my student loan payments and then some. I then headed over to Vermont to pick apples during the fall and use those earnings to finance another round of adventures.

I returned again and again to the migrant fields, gradually paying off my student loans by harvesting 60 tons of blueberries over eight summers. At the age of 31, I was debt-free.

PRESENT DAY

Fast forward to the present day. I have been able to put my formal education as well as the life experience gained from years of traveling to good use — first as a co-founder of *The Indypendent* and now as a labor journalist for one of the most progressive unions in the city. But when I look around I see family incomes stagnating while the cost of college tuition is soaring. Student loan debt nationally has topped a trillion dollars and millions of young people are struggling to pay back loans in an economy in which temp work and unpaid internships are increasingly the norm and good jobs are scarce. And if you want to run off and work the blueberry harvest? Good luck. Most of the work is now done by mechanical harvesters.



OUTSIDE THE BOX

I wince when I read comments from crotchety conservatives saying in effect, "I had to suffer with my student loans and so should you."

People, let's think outside the box. We live in a society of great abundance in which most of the new wealth that has been created over the past 30 years has been captured by the 1 percent. In turn, we live under a regime of artificial scarcity in which the resources needed for education, health care and other public goods are denied us.

For young people who are repeatedly exhorted to invest in their future but lack the "start-up capital" needed to pay for a college education, this means entering into a system of debt peonage.

The Mitt Romneys of the world did not earn their hoarded gold. Let's tax them heavily the way we still did 40 years ago when quality public education was still broadly affordable. And while we're at it let's downsize our bloated military (\$661 billion per year) and end the war in Afghanistan which clocks in at \$111 billion a year. We could use these resources to provide first-rate public higher education free of charge to everyone who wants it.

This isn't on the agenda of our political elites but a resurgence of mass movements like Occupy Wall Street (itself fueled last year by indebted people from all walks of life) can change that calculus. Finding the wild blueberry helped me solve my individual problem but the only real solution to the student debt crisis lies in collective action.

To read more about how student debt is impacting everyone from recent college graduates to the Occupy movement, turn to our extended coverage, starting on page 8.

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How Real Estate Splits the Labor Movement

BY ARI PAUL

Last month, Bronx officials joyously endorsed a proposal to convert the Kingsbridge Armory into a complex of ice-skating rinks. According to the *New York Times*, Bronx Borough President Ruben Diaz Jr., backed the plan because the developer "voluntarily pledged that every job created by the project would pay at least \$10 an hour with benefits, or \$11.50 an hour without benefits, in line with wage standards set by the city's recently passed 'living wage' legislation."

The City Council not only passed this legislation but also overrode a mayoral veto; Mayor Michael Bloomberg opposes the idea of government setting wage mandates for firms operating with government subsidies (such as loans or tax breaks), referring to the idea as "Soviet." The bill is now in legal limbo, as the mayor has filed a lawsuit, claiming that the council acted outside of its purview. Even Nicole Gelinas of the conservative Manhattan Institute raised her eyebrows at Bloomberg's intransigence, telling *The Indypendent*, "The City Council has spoken pretty loudly. People should look to who they elect, and not go to the courts."

Living-wage bills — meant to increase the standard of living of low-wage retail workers, many of whom are immigrants and people of color — have a lot of opponents, such as real estate developers who want to keep their operational costs down and politicians who are worried about getting re-elected. But a stumbling block has also been the city's powerful construction unions, who are siding with their employers instead of the rest of the labor movement. In fact, the ice-skating project at Kingsbridge has rekindled resentment among building trades unions dating back to 2009, when the Retail, Wholesale and Department Store Union blocked a development project at the site because there was no promise of a living wage.

The dynamic makes practical sense. The Great Recession has impeded construction, and without construction these unions' members don't get paid. "The building trade unions have always been tight with their employers," said Janice Fine, a professor at the School of Management and Labor Relations at Rutgers University. "They feel that [the living wage] will cramp business, so if busi-



ROBLAQUINTA

DEVELOPERS IN NYC

Tishman Speyer Properties LP

Counting the iconic Chrysler Building and Rockefeller Center amongst its assets, Tishman Speyer is a major real estate player in the city. In 2006, Tishman Speyer partnered with BlackRock Realty in the largest real estate deal in U.S. history: the \$5.4 billion purchase of Stuyvesant Town and Peter Cooper Village. Their valuation of this property was based on the heady assumption that the income from it would triple in five years. The result: Tishman Speyer defaulted last year on \$4.4 billion of debt from the deal. Tenants, moreover, have been cleared by the state's high court to pursue up to \$215 million in damages and rent rebates from Tishman Speyer for illegally collecting raised rents despite receiving tax breaks as part of a program designed to promote renovations in exchange for keeping rents affordable. This program cost the city an estimated \$257 million last year in forgone property taxes.

Forest City Ratner Corporation

Forest City Ratner is the developer responsible for the Atlantic Yards project in Downtown Brooklyn that, in addition to the Barclay Center, will include 247,000 sq ft for retail use and 336,000 sq ft of office space. It has proven to be one of the most controversial projects in recent memory. In July, a hearing was held to discuss whether Forest City Ratner should re-

nesses can't expand then [they] can't engage in construction. That's the dilemma."

This interruption of labor solidarity stems from a long-standing division in the U.S. labor movement. In mainstream unionism

there are two basic approaches: craft and industrial organizing. The former organizes by specific jobs and derives its strength from its ability to control who can get jobs, while the latter organizes workers in a whole in-

ceive nearly \$92 million in tax-exempt bonds for the project, yet the city made only the bare minimum effort in publicizing the hearing. It was only attended by a few dozen people, and would-be voices were drowned out.

Related Companies

Holding \$15 billion worth of assets, this developer counts the 10-year, \$15 billion Hudson Yards project in the far West Side as its capstone project. Public subsidy watchdog group Good Jobs New York testified before the New York Industrial Development Agency in July to argue against a proposal to give further subsidies to the tune of \$100 million to Related Companies for yet another commercial tower when the Bloomberg administration has already made extensive efforts to make the area ripe for development through re-zoning, massive infrastructure investment and various tax breaks. The city may now be responsible for an additional \$500 million by the end of 2015 just to service the interest on the \$3 billion in bonds given to the Hudson Yards project. At the end of August, Related extracted an agreement for labor-cost-cutting measures from the city's construction unions after months of tense negotiations. Related Cos. reportedly threatened to use nonunion labor for the project if it did not get the labor cost-savings it wanted.

— Anooj Kansara

TREADING WATER IN A SHRINKING POOL

Just like subway delays and traffic jams, construction is one of the many certainties of daily life for New Yorkers. The industry rakes in between \$20 billion to \$30 billion each year, but the 40 percent of the 171,000 (mostly male) workers that belong to building unions are seeing an increasingly smaller slice of this pie. For many years, at least 85 percent of construction jobs were held by union members. But with many developers pushing to cut labor costs, unionized construction companies claim that two out of five construction jobs in the city are now nonunion. Eroding density means that unions have less bargaining power and are more likely to be forced to make wage and benefit concessions. Further, the fact that many construction unions do not have clear plans to organize the largely immigrant non-union workforce means that unions' struggle to regain their foothold in the construction industry will be an uphill battle.

— Bennett Baumer

dustry and finds power in diversity and inclusion.

Think of it this way: Transport Workers Union Local 100, an industrial union, represents transit workers in most job categories, with 30,000 members from different ethnic backgrounds at different wage levels. Any given construction site, in contrast, has dozens of different unions organized by trade (electrician, plumber, carpenter, etc.). And because these locals turn into hamlets of power, they are used to give jobs to friends and family, thus explaining why certain occupations tend to be dominated by one ethnic group or another.

In New York, this dynamic has made for some rocky times. Building trade unions have fought alongside workers in other sectors. But there have been other political differences, including a schism in the left when these types of unions supported the Vietnam War.

"This is a current iteration of a kind of tension that over the years has surfaced and receded and resurfaced," said Josh Freeman, professor of history at the CUNY Graduate Center and author of *Working Class New York: Life and Labor Since World War II*. "I'm sure the Central Labor Council is trying its best to find some common ground or a way of containing this, to keep from creating rifts."

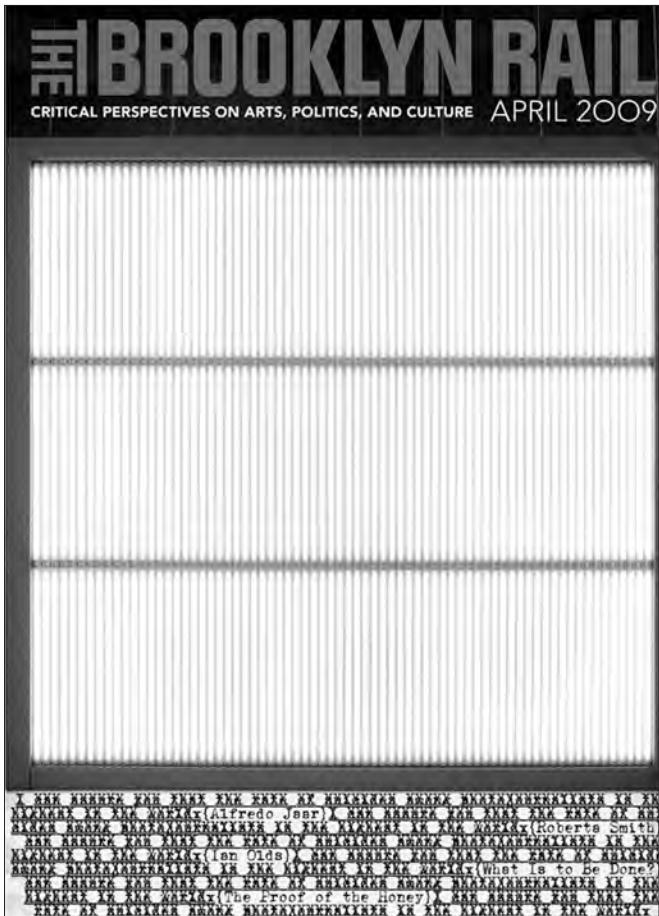
"Organizations became bureaucratized and sort of lost their movement roots and became married to a business model and lost [their] identification with the working class," Fine said. "The idea that a largely unorganized sector is a threat to the labor movement just went out the window."

So how to fix this? Part of the problem, Fine believes, is the lack of labor education. There should be more forums where, say, an iron worker might attend class alongside retail and service workers, in order for workers across the spectrum to recognize each others' interests.

"That's the kind of solidarity that is definitely a possibility, but has to be encouraged by their organizations," Fine said. "There has to be some sense that the fate of these low-wage workers has some impact on the lives of these construction workers."

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Temp Worker Nation

IF YOU DO GET HIRED, IT MIGHT NOT BE FOR LONG

BY STEVEN WISHNIA

Almost one-third of U.S. workers are now some kind of freelancers, and they lack almost every kind of economic security that permanent full-time workers have traditionally had. Though exact figures are impossible to find, many experts and labor organizers estimate that about 30 percent of U.S. workers are “contingent.” That means they don’t have a permanent job. They work as freelancers or temporary workers, on contract or on call, or their employers define them (often illegally) as “independent contractors.”

Their ranks include writers and warehouse workers, janitors and business consultants, truck drivers and graphic designers — and their numbers are rising. Richard Greenwald, a sociologist and professor at St. Joseph’s College in Brooklyn, estimates that their share of the U.S. workforce has increased by close to half in the last 10 years. In July, Staffing Industry Analysts, an industry research company, reported that the average share of contingent workers at companies it surveyed had gone up by one-third since 2009, to 16 percent. Last year, a different survey found that contingent workers averaged 22 percent of the workers at 200 large companies.

These workers are often called the “precariat,” a combination of “precarious” and “proletariat,” because the traditional social safety nets for workers don’t support them. They have no job security as they hustle from one gig to the next, and they often don’t know where their next job is coming from or when it will come. They very rarely get paid sick days or vacation. They don’t get paid extra for working overtime. They are usually not eligible for unemployment benefits, and they generally have to pay both the worker’s and the employer’s share of Social Security taxes. They have to pay for their own health insurance, and Obamacare won’t change that. (However, beginning in 2014, people will be able to buy private insurance at group rates, and lower-income and working-class people will get some subsidies to help them pay for it.)

They have few options if an employer cheats them out of their pay. If they are independent contractors, they do not have the right to form a labor union.

“Instability is going to be with us,” says Sara Horowitz, head of the New York-based Freelancers Union. “The truth is that we’re in a period of decline for workers.”

THE NEW WAY WE WORK

Who are freelancers and contingent workers? The federal Bureau of Labor Statistics has not done an official study since 2005, when it estimated that they were 10 to 15 percent of the U.S. workforce. If their income is reported on a 1099 tax form instead of on a W-2 form with deductions, its monthly payroll surveys won’t count them as having jobs. Its household surveys count them as employed, but don’t ask about their job arrangements.

Catherine Ruckelshaus, legal co-director of the National Employment Law Project in New York, counts as a contingent worker “everyone who’s not a W-2 employee,” including people paid on 1099s, franchisees, and people paid in cash, such as construction day laborers. Richard Greenwald arrived at his estimates by counting sole-proprietorship businesses and people who listed more income on 1099s than on W-2s.

The number has risen significantly in the last 15 years, Greenwald says, and the pace has increased since the recession began, with many new “permatemp” jobs. This trend affects workers at all income levels, but the fastest-growing sector is college graduates in “creative” fields. In the last few years, book publishers and advertising agencies have outsourced their graphic designers, hiring them back as freelancers with no benefits. Many publishers now hire editors on a per-manuscript basis.

“As the industry or technology tweaks, it often does so in a way that’s freelance or non-union,” says Justin Molito, director of organizing with the Writers’ Guild of America East. For example, writers on HBO’s scripted shows are unionized, but those on basic cable and reality TV shows aren’t.

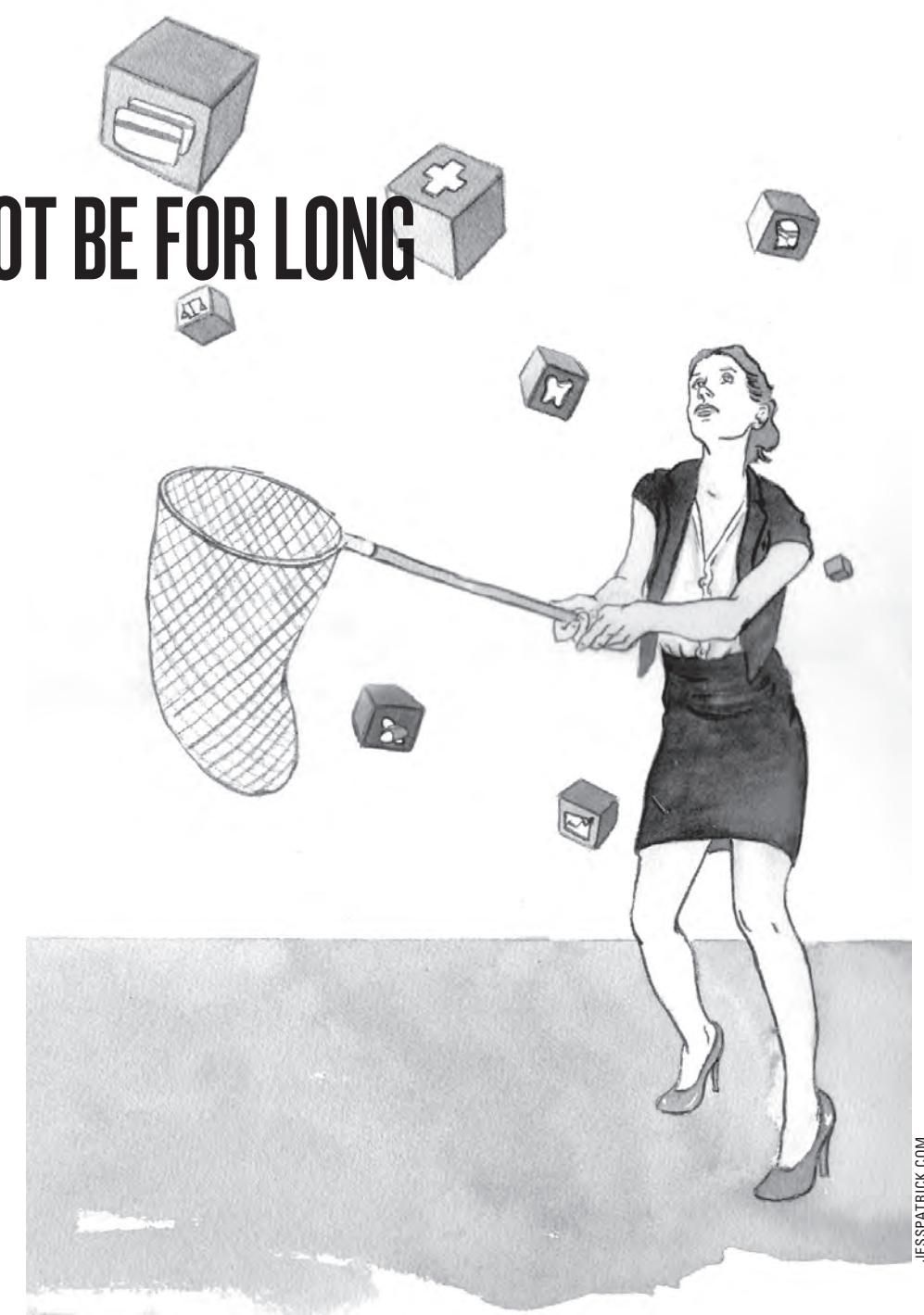
Greenwald distinguishes between workers who chose freelancing and those who were “shoved into it.” The most successful freelancers, he says, are information technology, management and finance consultants. They have a specific skill and steady clients, and “think of themselves as entrepreneurs.” Many white-collar freelancers make middle-class incomes, \$45,000 to \$50,000 a year, he says, but they have to pay for the office supplies, health insurance and taxes that would normally be covered by an employer, and they have no security.

This is not just a recession-induced thing, he says. It reflects a long-term change in the economy. Since the 1980s, management’s philosophy has evolved to “look at work as projects.” Instead of keeping employees on staff to perform all work needed, they outsource tasks or hire consultants.

“This gives companies tremendous flexibility without any risk,” Greenwald says. “Flexibility” means they don’t have to keep people on the payroll during slack periods, pay them when they’re sick, pay for their health insurance, or obey workplace regulations. This, he says, has “shifted all the risks that large institutions used to have onto the backs of individuals.”

“It’s a great business model, but as a social model, it doesn’t work,” he explains. Essentially, it means that the world of work is becoming more like the music business, in which a handful of superstars get rich and a minority of professionals have steady work with benefits, but most workers have to scuffle for intermittent, low-paying gigs, and hard work and talent are worthless without marketing skills, clout and charisma. “The bar to get in is low, but [making] a living is harder and harder,” he says.

The overall social change “might be as big as the shift from farm to factory,” Gre-



JESSPATRICK.COM

enwald says. “I don’t think that many freelancers have thought of this as a permanent way of life. It seems to be a shift back to 19th-century artisanal culture.”

THE CASUAL WORKING CLASS

Though the traditional image of a freelancer is a middle-class professional like a magazine writer or computer consultant, this shift affects a huge number of blue-collar workers too, especially in the fast-growing fields of warehousing, delivery and home healthcare. Many of these workers are now either temps or defined as “independent contractors.”

“Often relying on the use of temporary and staffing agencies, outsourcing in these industries has also resulted in comparatively lower wages for work similar to the jobs previously performed in-house,” the National Employment Law Project reported in “Chain of Greed,” a study of Walmart warehouses released in June.

At the Nissan auto factory in Canton, Miss., more than 20 percent of the 4,400 workers are temps, according to the *Labor Notes* monthly newsletter. The company says it plans to hire 1,000 new workers this year, but all will be temporary. The temps start at \$12 an hour, \$7-11 less than what permanent workers earn after five years, and workers say no temp has ever been permanently hired at the plant. Even at Ford’s Detroit-area plants, the classic bastion of

union industrial labor, local activist Dianne Feeley, a retired United Auto Workers member, says a significant percentage of workers are temps or contract workers.

“A huge problem,” says Catherine Ruckelshaus, is employers illegally defining workers as independent contractors. “Some employers are asking workers to form LLCs (limited liability companies, a form of business that combines features of a corporation and a partnership) before a construction drywall job.”

FedEx Ground, for example, defines its 15,000 drivers as independent contractors, even though they drive company-assigned routes and must drive vans with the FedEx logo and color scheme.

“There are millions of Americans classified as independent contractors by the companies they work for, but [they are] effectively working as employees,” American Rights at Work, a Washington-based labor-rights nonprofit, said in a 2007 report on FedEx Ground. “These workers suffer the worst of both worlds: they toil without the protections and benefits of employees, yet are without the control over their work that true independent contractors enjoy.”

The legal definition, Ruckelshaus says, is whether the person is running an independent business — are they investing their own money, and can they pass on increased costs? The Internal Revenue Service’s general rule is that an individual is an indepen-

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dent contractor if the person hiring them has “the right to control or direct only the result of the work,” while the worker decides “the means and methods of accomplishing the result.”

The scam’s advantage for employers is that they don’t have to pay minimum wage, overtime, workers’ compensation or Social Security, Medicare and unemployment taxes. The result, the American Rights at Work report said, is that FedEx drivers not only make less money than those at UPS, who are permanent workers with a union; they also have to pay for gas and maintenance for their vans. Many lease vans from a company-approved supplier, Ruckelshaus says.

Some employers even define janitors and home healthcare aides as “franchisees” she continues. For example, an office building’s management might hire a cleaning-services subcontractor, whose workers then “buy” the job of cleaning one section of the building, paying in advance in exchange for a piece of the company’s fee.

Coverall, a Florida-based cleaning-services company, calls its more than 9,000 workers “franchisees,” and its more than 90 regional offices are “support centers.” In Boston, says Ruckelshaus, these franchisees might have to pay the company as much as \$10,000 to claim a job, recouping that investment from their wages. If they don’t have the money, they can borrow it from a company-recommended lender. In some cases, she says, they have had to work the first month on spec, getting paid for it only if the Coverall boss approves them for the job. They also have to buy cleaning equipment and supplies from the company. But Coverall makes the deals for the jobs, so the workers can’t raise their rates or ask the client for work on their own.

In home healthcare, a field with 3 million mostly women workers that is one of the fastest-growing job sectors in the U.S. economy, for-profit agencies call themselves “registries” of independent contractors. They do this, says Ruckelshaus, even though they hire the workers, train them, assign them to jobs and set rates. It means they don’t have to pay minimum wage or overtime.

“There’s no enforcement,” she says. “It becomes part of the structure of these jobs.”

Warehouse and shipping work is a major area of abuse as well. Walmart and Amazon outsource their massive warehouse and shipping operations to subcontractors, who then use temporary agencies to hire employees. Workers often don’t even know who their actual employer is, says Ruckelshaus.

“They pit these little subcontractors against each other,” says Erin Johansson, research director of American Rights at Work. “To compete and win a contract, you’ve got to pay your workers minimal wages.”

In this system, according to the “Chain of Greed” report, workers are paid piecework, according to the number of containers or trucks they finish unloading on a shift, instead of an hourly wage. They don’t get paid for anything else they do on the job.

The result is “rampant minimum wage and overtime violations,” the report said. Workers also have to unload dangerously stacked piles of boxes, some of which weigh up to 200 pounds, says Johansson.

Walmart insists on ever-lower costs, so “workers are the ones getting squeezed and chiseled,” says Ruckelshaus. “This relationship is hurting low-wage women and those at the bottom of the supply chains, and the big corporations aren’t being held accountable for low wages and poor conditions.”

Another issue is that freelancers have almost no recourse if an employer cheats them. State wage-theft laws do not cover freelancers. If a client stiffed them, it’s considered a business dispute, so their only recourse is to sue in small-claims court. That can take months and multiple court appearances, and even if you win your case, collecting the debt is not guaranteed.

The Freelancers Union says 77 percent of its 180,000 members have had trouble collecting money they’re owed. Earlier this year, it lobbied for New York to enact a law that would let stiffed freelancers file wage-theft complaints with the state Department of Labor. But in New York’s gerrymandered legislature, the measure wound up as a “one-house bill”: It passed in the Democrat-dominated Assembly, but never reached the floor in the Republican-controlled state Senate.

“If you have 30 percent of the workforce being exploited, that lowers standards for everybody,” says Johansson.

WHAT CAN BE DONE?

Traditional union organizing is notoriously difficult with contingent workers. Organized labor’s strongest power over employers is workers’ ability to go on strike and stop production. If freelancers try that on their own, the employer will simply hire someone else. That they have neither a common location nor a collective workforce is also a barrier to organizing collectively.

The Writers’ Guild of America, a union of TV and movie screenwriters, has successfully organized freelancers, winning elections and creating collective-bargaining agreements at studios. In July, it won company-paid health benefits, paid vacation, and a minimum salary for writers at two New York reality-show studios. But its 4,000 members’ status is much closer to permanent workers than that of most freelancers. They usually work on long-term contracts, typically three or four years, and have “professional relationships and solidarity among themselves,” says the Guild’s Justin Molito.

“This is a long-term movement to aid those who’ve fallen through the cracks,” Molito says. “As other industries become more freelance, the labor movement has to develop strategies to create organizations that provide protections and make improvements.” Those strategies include “building a long-term movement, raising standards across the board, trying to organize an entire industry.”

The Freelancers’ Union has largely aban-

doned the traditional union model, to the point where the organization might be more accurately described as a service and lobbying group than a labor union. Permanent workers are losing security and benefits, says union head Sara Horowitz, so why should freelancers expect them?

“I exist in reality,” she says. “The first step is to admit that something’s changed.”

Instead, she touts what she calls the “new mutualism”—freelancers banding together on the principles of “affinity and solidarity,” such as networking and organizing cooperatives to buy food and health insurance. (The group sells nonprofit health insurance to 23,000 members in New York, and plans to expand that to New Jersey and Oregon in 2014, when the Obamacare insurance exchanges open.)

But how is any of that going to help get freelancers paid sick days? “Good luck with that,” she answers.

Organized freelancers “will be able to make the freelance economy work even better,” she explains in an e-mail, “by influencing the freelance labor market, by continuing to improve the laws that affect freelancers (i.e., passing legislation to give freelancers recourse when they are stiffed) and by continuing to give freelancers opportunities to work together.” On the other hand, she says the Freelancers Union will not be able on its own to “reverse larger economic trends” like declining wages in the media industry.

Workers should speak out about abuses, says Johansson. The bad publicity created by “shining a light on working conditions for large companies” such as Walmart and Amazon might help hold them accountable for how subcontractors and their workers are treated.

Legally, she says, “just enforcing the law” against misclassification would help. In June, the National Labor Relations Board ruled that the 350 taxi drivers at Baltimore-Washington International Airport had been wrongly classified as independent contractors. Their employer, which has an exclusive contract for taxi service at the airport, is appealing the decision.

Sen. Tom Harkin (D-IA) and Rep. Lynn Woolsey (D-CA) have introduced bills to tighten the definition of an independent contractor.

Still, trying to improve conditions for freelancers and contingent workers is difficult in an economic system that has been vampirizing workers’ rights and incomes for a generation.

“The social contract that was part of American society for many years is dead,” says Greenwald. “We need to have a serious conversation about who’s winning and who’s not winning.”

Steven Wishnia is a freelance writer and editor and author of the novel When the Drumming Stops (Manic D Press). An earlier version of this article appeared on alternet.org.

OWS and ‘Strike Debt’

TAKING AIM AT THE TIES THAT BIND THE 99%

BY YATES MCKEE

ONE, we are the zombies! TWO; we are indebted! THREE; this occupation is... om-nom nom-nom..."

Playfully infusing a familiar Occupy Wall Street chant with the mindless noshing of zombies, last June around 100 costumed protesters undertook a "Night of the Living Debt" march around the New York University campus and Washington Square Park. The event was organized by All in the Red, an initiative of student activists that grows out of the nocturnal marches that began earlier this summer in solidarity with the massive popular mobilization in Quebec against austerity-related tuition hikes. Equipped with an arsenal of felt red squares, red banners, red balloons, red confetti and pots and pans, the young organizers — recent graduates of the OWS Summer Disobedience School training program — undertook the first coordinated march in New York to translate student-specific struggles surrounding tuition and education debt into a broader discourse concerning the perpetual condition of indebtedness in which the 99% currently finds itself. With its necromantic pop-culture reference, the march suggested that zombie-like servitude to Wall Street creditors is a basic condition of life for the majority of the population — a point driven home with a cathartic "debtors' die-in" at the conclusion of the event.

The Night of the Living Debt march was just one sign that debt is emerging as a connective thread for OWS organizers and their allies as they begin to build toward the movement's one-year anniversary on September 17, variously known as S17, Black Monday and Occupy Year One. Many organizers in OWS plan to use the media spotlight surrounding the day and its build-up to build what Sandra Nurse calls a "launching pad" for a new kind of political movement in the United States — a movement of debtors identifying themselves as such.

This is not an entirely new focus. Some of the most prominent initiatives of OWS, and the Occupy movement more broadly, have revolved around the foreclosure crisis, and the Occupy Student Debt Campaign (OSDC) succeeded in drawing national attention to the student debt crisis with 1T Day in April, marking the fact that outstanding student debt has reached \$1 trillion. However, these organizing efforts have tended to treat different sectors of debt as single-issue campaigns in isolation from one another. And yet when one looks back to early OWS platforms, such as the 99% Tumblr, one finds that indebtedness of all sorts was already a self-conscious motivation for many participants and sympathizers. As the one-year anniversary approaches, a key question for many organizers is how to forge alliances among groups suffering from and organizing against different kinds of debt-servitude. As OSDC organizer Pamela Brown put it in a June article on Alternet: "We are faced with a broken American social contract, and have reached a critical moment for the 99%. Under these circumstances, it seems obvious that a political movement to build a new dream should take debt as its focus."

A major development last spring was the

staging of the first New York City Debtors' Assembly in Washington Square Park on June 11. The format was simple, and the facilitation was minimal. Seated around a banner reading "Strike Debt" and adorned with the red felt square familiar from student struggles in Quebec, those assembled were invited to publicly share their "debt stories" with a cardboard "debtors' mic." Over two hours, several dozen people from a wide range of backgrounds and generations delivered emotionally charged, first-person testimonials about the experience of debt-servitude to Wall Street and its intermediary institutions. Whether speaking of the ruinous effects of student, credit card, healthcare or mortgage debt, almost all of the speakers remarked that this was their

HOW DEBT BECAME THE FOCUS

Among the most interesting post-May Day experiments were a series of outdoor, outward-facing "thematic assemblies" hosted on a weekly basis at Washington Square by the group Occupy Theory (OT), which also publishes *Tidal* magazine. Avoiding the unwieldy decision-making apparatus of the Zuccotti-era General Assembly, as well as the often insular culture of OWS working groups, the OT assemblies emphasized open-ended reflection on specific political problems. Among the participants in the thematic assemblies were members of Occupy University, Free University Think Tank, F The Banks and the OSDC. One late May assembly focused on the concept of global solidarity in light of the intensifying student

economy, the personal debt system is a primary engine of Wall Street profits, and it is prone to crisis. Indeed, the student-loan bubble is regarded by many analysts as analogous to the subprime mortgage bubble that led to the crisis of 2008, with a trillion dollars in unpayable loans bundled together and resold by banks through elaborate financial instruments. The debt system is a highly tangible way in which the predatory logic of Wall Street affects the lives of families and communities. And yet, as Chris Kasper of the OWS Arts and Labor group put it in the inaugural assembly, "Even as it connects us all to global capitalism, debt isolates, atomizes and individuates. The first step is breaking the silence, shedding the fear and creating a space where we can appear together without shame."

MESSAGING IN THE MAKING

Speakers in the first assembly drew analogies to the notion of "coming out" in the gay rights movement, in which a new sense of political identity was forged by collectively embracing an otherwise stigmatized individual condition — "Silence = Debt," a play on the famous ACT UP slogan about AIDS, "Silence = Death," has been put forward as a meme, alongside the slogan "You Are Not a Loan." Another well-received propaganda project to emerge from the debt assemblies has been a sticker reading "Hello, My Debt Is...", designed to resemble a nametag. A large banner has also been produced featuring this design; participants in the debt assemblies are invited to sign the banner with the dollar-amount they owe to creditors, with each signature highlighted by a safety-pinned red felt square of the sort typically affixed to the clothing of protesters.

According to artist Leina Bocar, creator of the participatory banner: "The felt square is increasingly recognized in New York as a signature not only of student struggles, but of debtors more generally. It mediates between the intimate scale of the body and the collective scale of the banner, the assembly, and indeed the movement as a whole."

Looming over these discussions of debtors' movement has been the question of a debt strike, a deliberate withdrawal of consent by debtors from the system designed to keep them paying in perpetuity. Millions already do not and cannot pay their debt and are in effect on strike. These de facto debt-strikers constitute what has been described as an "invisible army of defaulters" with massive political potential. Debt strike — or debt refusal, as OSDC describes it in an online pledge — is a significant alternative to the notion of debt forgiveness, which has been advocated by some groups rallying around the Student Loan Forgiveness Act. In the words of OSDC member Christopher Casuccio, "Forgiveness, while certainly a noble idea, implies a guilty debtor asking to be freed from its sin. Refusal, on the other hand, is an empowering, collective challenge to an illegitimate and predatory debt-system."

However, organized collective refusal is a project requiring long-term research, organizing and support. To simply call for a debt strike without thorough groundwork is unlikely to resonate with debtors already living

STUDENT DEBT BY THE NUMBERS

Total amount of student debt in U.S.: Over \$1 trillion
 Average amount of student debt per person: \$24,301
 The amount of past-due student loan balances: \$85 billion
 Percentage of families with education debt in 2010: 19.2 percent

(Sources: Bloomberg Business Week, Washington Post, U.S. News & World Report, New York Times, Federal Reserve Bank of New York)

Beyond STUDENT DEBT

Total amount of credit card debt in the U.S.: \$693 billion
 Total amount of automobile debt in the U.S.: \$730 billion
 Average amount of credit card debt per household: Almost \$16,000
 Percentage of low and middle-income Americans who use their credit cards to pay for out-of-pocket medical expenses: 50 percent
 Percentage of 19 to 29-year-olds having difficulty paying medical bills or medical debt: 36 percent

(Sources: Federal Reserve Bank of New York, PR Newswire, Huffington Post, CNN Money)

— KAREN OKAMOTO & TONY D'SOUZA

very first time speaking publicly about their status as debtors. To speak as a debtor, and to address others as debtors, was an empowering process in its own right. The simple act of speaking openly built community and solidarity based on a shared experience of breaking with debt-shame — the insidious sense that to be indebted is an individual moral failure rather than an enforced condition of life under contemporary capitalism. As Shyam Khanna, one of the attendees, put it, the assembly created a space for "debtors to find each other, for debtors to become a political subject."

The Debtors' Assembly was an important development in the overall trajectory of OWS. Lacking a general assembly or a spokescouncil that is empowered to make movement-wide decisions, OWS as it currently stands is a disparate network of working groups, affinity groups and project groups that sometimes overlap and other times work in isolation. Some have lamented that this "structureless" condition contributes to a deadly lack of focus and diffusion of energy, leading some to claim that Occupy as a both a trope and movement has itself been exhausted. Others have seen the post-May Day interregnum as a fruitful period of reflection and reinvention on tactics, strategy, alliances and goals.

struggles in Quebec. From an organic process attuned to developments in New York and around the world came a decision to devote the subsequent assembly to "Education and Debt," with a focus on building a political movement specifically around the intersection of these terms.

The initial OT Education and Debt assembly — which preceded the full-scale NYC Debtors' Assembly by a week — was remarkable for the kind of space it opened up. It wove together the testimonial format with a highly focused conversation about the strategies, tactics, messaging and coalition-building required to make the condition of indebtedness the galvanizing focal point for a full-scale political movement rather than a single-issue campaign. As indicated in the notes from the meeting, which were circulated online throughout OWS social networks, several major questions that have long preoccupied OSDC are in the process of moving to the forefront of OWS as a whole.

Debt is the tie that binds the 99%. Almost everyone in the United States is a debtor of some sort. Even those excluded from mainstream credit systems are still preyed upon by lending institutions, exemplified by payday loan sharks and pawn shops scattered throughout poor neighborhoods. Rather than a supplementary facet of the overall



LUCY VALKURY

in fear around their credit ratings and day-to-day survival.

An alternative messaging framework that has emerged from these assemblies has been "Strike Debt"

— variously telegraphed as #strikedebt and DEBT. Playing on the metaphorical possibilities of the word "strike," in the words of Amin Husain, "Strike Debt opens imaginative space for a wide spectrum of thought and action without limiting a politics of indebtedness to any predetermined model." Striking debt here can mean many things; it conjures images of a physical blow against a specified target, or crossing out the tabulation on which crippling debt is registered. Some Strike Debt propaganda depicts the striking of a match, evoking the image of burning debt-state-

ments, an echo of draft-card burning protests of the 1960s and 1970s. The iconic Quebec red square supplemented with the DEBT sign has started to go viral on Facebook.

The call to strike debt also incorporates OWS principles of mutual aid. To strike debt would involve legal, financial and cultural infrastructures of support and care for those suffering from indebtedness or deliberately taking the risk of debt refusal. Mutual aid in this sense would be the prefigurative opposite of Wall Street's atomizing, predatory and fear-mongering debt system. An intriguing possible pilot project is a "debt fairy" campaign in which groups of private citizens would pool resources to purchase defaulted debt for pennies on the dollar from banks (who typically sell to collection agencies) liberating the debtor from their burden. While not a structural solution — and not applicable to student loans — it could, if implemented on a larger scale, become what David Graeber imagines as a "moving jubilee," capable of both garnering media attention around debtors' struggles and taking business away from the intermediary companies that profit from hounding and penalizing those who are unable to pay.

As debt provides a gateway into a radical conversation about the capitalist system itself, strategic and analytical questions arise about the role of the state — questions that have always haunted OWS as a movement grounded in anarchist principles. What can we learn from the debt cancellation forced upon the Icelandic government by citizens earlier this year? How do we connect the dots between "personal" debt and the public debt of municipalities and governments subjected to corporate bondholders and credit-rating agencies? How do we link struggles against budgetary austerity with the grievances of the indebted? As Andrew Ross asked on *Democracy Now!* last fall, "How might debt be rethought as something socially productive and collectively managed, rather than as an engine of predatory profiteering for the 1%?"

Can we think beyond existing models of public finance, planning and infrastructure toward something closer to the ideal of "the commons"? Activist and New York University professor Nick Mirzoeff speculates, if "slavery" to debt were abolished, what would a subsequent "Reconstruction" process look like? For ordinary people to delve into these questions is empowering in its own right, and for OWS they will continue to be explored through public assembly and direct action of the sort that began at Liberty Square last September.

The physical tactic of occupation first deployed on Sept. 17 of last year, is unlikely to be replicated, but the spaces of education, empowerment and imagination created by Occupy remain open. Debtors — which is to say, the 99% — are poised to step out of the shadows and into that space, providing it with the content and focus required for what was once a precarious encampment to evolve into a sustainable social movement.

Yates McKee is an art critic and activist based in New York City.

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GENERATION DEBT

I'm too scared to check the real number I owe'

TEXT BY ELIZABETH HENDERSON & ASHLEY MARINACCIO
PHOTOS BY ASHLEY MARINACCIO

Last spring, the amount of student debt in the United States passed the \$1 trillion mark. For many, the struggle to pay back what they owe will take decades. Monthly letters from Sallie Mae serve as a constant reminder of what one contributor to [occupystudentdebt.com](#) described as "student loan slavery."

Over the past 30 years, the average salaries of graduates from four-year colleges have grown to twice what high school graduates make. And yet, college graduates are grappling with the question: Is a college degree worth it? Here are some of their stories.



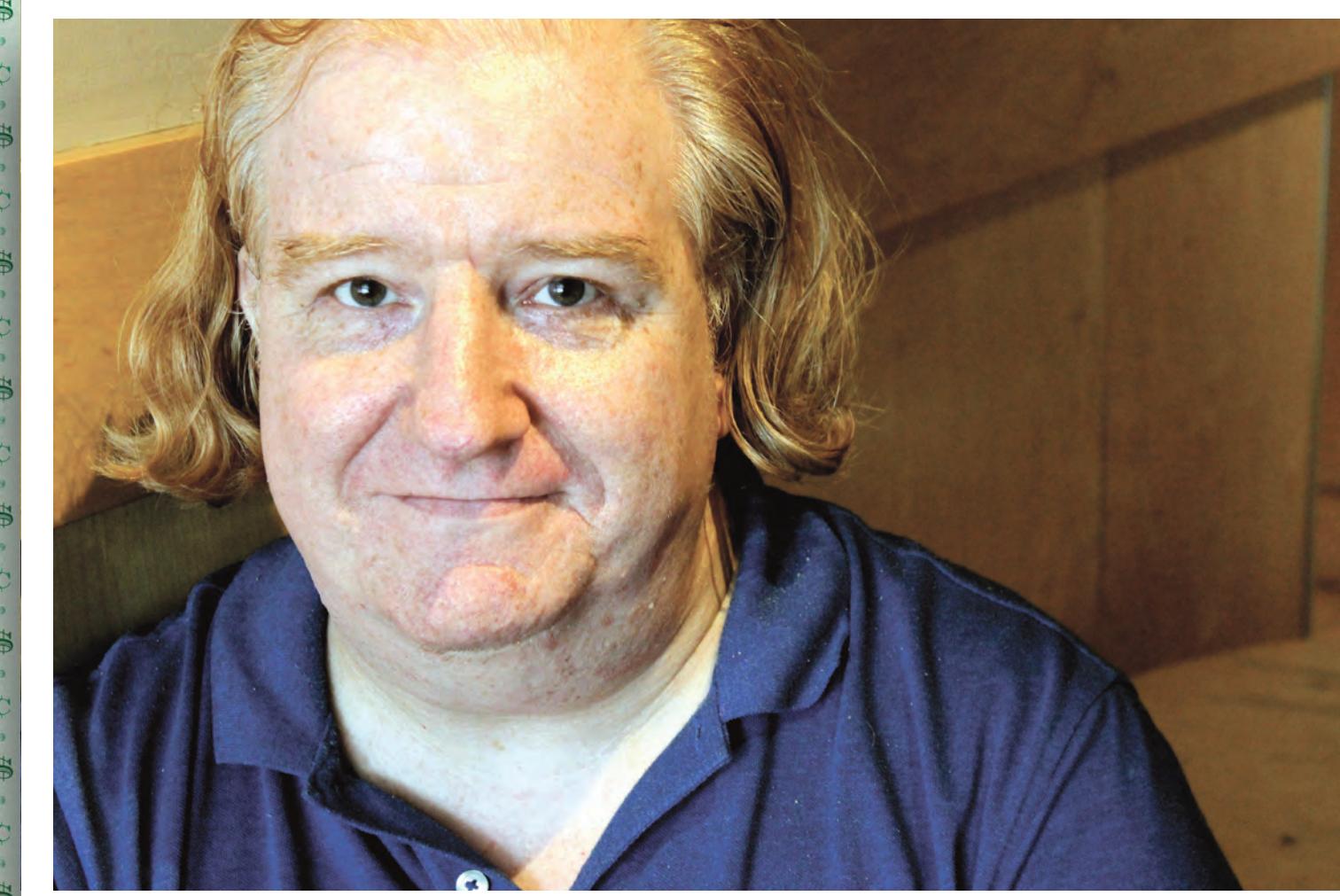
KERRIE BOND, 25
Debt: Around \$40,000
Education: Pace University, BFA in Musical Theater
Current job: Part-time position as a publisher's assistant at a real estate trade newspaper; sells tickets to Broadway shows in her spare time
Bottom line: I'm not sure anything is really worth this amount of debt. And mine isn't even the worst.



DANIELLE WALKER, 21
Debt: \$16,500
Education: Fulton-Montgomery Community College and Kingsborough Community College, Associate's degree in Communications, currently enrolled
Bottom line: My loan collector has changed almost twice a year since 2008. I've received notices to start paying back my loans even though I have yet to graduate. I've been charged interest for loans from my previous college, Fulton-Montgomery Community College, even though all payments are supposed to be in deferment.



LAUREN ARNESON, 28
Debt: Around \$12,000
Education: Borough of Manhattan Community College, currently enrolled
Bottom line: I have mostly been able to get deferments so far since I am in and out of classes. Sallie Mae declined my application for a student loan last week. I am too scared to check the real number that I owe. I haven't graduated yet, so it stands to get much worse.



ROBERT HIEGER, 50
Debt: \$40,000
Education: City University of New York, BA in Unique and Interdisciplinary Studies/Integrated Web Applications and Design
Current job: Self-employed web designer
Bottom line: I honestly ask myself every day whether my college education was worth the debt. I have not come up with a conclusive answer.



NICOLE YVONNE DUNCAN-SMITH, 38
Debt: \$110,000
Education: Spelman College, BA in Sociology; New York Theological Seminary, Masters in Divinity, currently enrolled
Bottom line: I believe that we should always invest in our lives, but by no means should we live under a boulder of debt that seems to grow bigger and bigger with each passing day. Banks have been bailed out but we have not. I am not lazy. Never have been. I am incredibly industrious and work very, very hard. But this will be a thorn in my side for the rest of my life.



SARAH ROTKER, 30
Debt: \$15,000
Education: Wagner College, BA in Arts Administration
Current job: Helps run a museum box office; babysits, tutors and bakes in her spare time
Bottom line: I recently got a collection call from ACS Education Services. The woman who called seemed sympathetic to what she undoubtedly recognized as the sound of complete and utter defeat in my voice. Toward the end of the phone call she asked, "Now, is there anything else I can help you with?" And I shot back, "Not unless you have a part-time job for me so I can make enough money to pay you!" She gave me a polite laugh, and then told me that she was working part-time making these calls to pay off her own student loans. As if this economy would pass up an opportunity for irony.



STACEY OLIVER, 19
Debt: Unknown; Cost of college \$240,000
Education: New York University, BA in Acting, currently enrolled
Bottom line: I definitely missed out on the "college experience." I was so overwhelmed with the thought of paying off my loans, I've spent almost all of my free time working, and it hasn't helped me make a dent in my loans. Instead it has made me restless, given me little time for schoolwork, and almost no time for a social life. I wish I knew how much debt I had. I don't even have a ballpark number.

Calling the Shots

WORKER-RUN FACTORIES SPREAD IN VENEZUELA

BY EWAN ROBERTSON

Walking into the plush corporate-style boardroom, I greeted workers from the Graftos del Orinoco factory before sitting down to conduct the interview. On the white board next to the door, the latest decision of the workers' factory assembly was still in evidence: whether to pay themselves an end-of-year bonus. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the workers had reached an almost unanimous consensus, with only one of the factory's 55 employees not in favor.

The sound of meat sizzling on the barbecue, salsa music and laughter drifted in from the yard below. It was the December 2011 Christmas party for workers and their families, and they had plenty to celebrate. By their own admission, after a long struggle against the former boss and a trial-and-error learning process in self-management, the workers at Graftos had succeeded in consolidating one of the most advanced and successful worker-run factories in the Guayana region in eastern Venezuela. I had previously visited the factory with activists in April 2011, and as part of an investigation into the worker control movement in the region, had returned to see how the workers at Graftos were getting on.

The struggle for worker control in Graftos began in early 2009, when the former boss refused to negotiate a new contract with the workers' union and tried to close the factory, taking the machinery with him. In response, the workers began a factory occupation that lasted eight months before the Venezuelan labor ministry released a "decree of temporary occupation for the reactivation of the company," which in effect awarded the factory to the workers to manage as they saw fit.

The workers then debated how the factory should be run, and decided that the aim should be a model of collective self-management, says Henry Escalon, the elected company president. Escalon's position exists only to fulfill the legal obligation of having a company president, as he himself likes to make clear.

WORKER COUNCILS

In September 2010 a workers' council was installed to decide how to organize the workers' control of the factory. Escalon and the other workers described to me how at first they had been unprepared for self-management. One of their mistakes was the attempt to make every decision in a factory assembly with all the workers, which is the "sovereign" decision-making body at Graftos. This proved inefficient and "wore workers out," with Escalon emphasizing that "holding an assembly to agree to buy a screw, no, that's falling into the abyss."

Through this process of trial and error, the Graftos workers arrived at their current model of collective management. While the factory assembly of all workers remains the decision-making body, committees are created to focus on specific aspects of running the factory, such as finance and production. A committee can also be set up to look into a particular issue or problem. Escalon himself has a committee of eight workers watching over his actions to ensure accountability.

we are one of the most important worker-controlled companies in Venezuela, and we are available to accompany fellow workers in the same struggle to keep advancing this idea [of worker control]," said Barreto.

Sitting comfortably in the boardroom they could previously enter only with the permission of the factory owner, workers described economic, psychological and community benefits of the democratic worker control model of factory management. Spurred on

the story of one of their colleagues who suffered an accident in November 2011. All the workers gave two days salary to help him with his recovery, a gesture "from the heart," as one worker put it. In the opinion of Barreto, "this solidarity and comradeship is really valuable and important" for working life in the factory.

Another change has been the role of the factory in the community. As Barreto explained, "Apart from improving the workers' quality of life, we want to contribute to society, seeing that the resources we produce are geared toward society."

Along with supplying Venezuela's nationalized industries and politically supporting other worker control projects, Graftos allocates a portion of its resources to various community and social causes. These include grants to community groups, funding for school equipment and donations to international causes such as helping refugees in Haiti after the January 2010 earthquake.

Beyond the sometimes tricky process of developing a worker control model, the factory has faced economic, political and legal challenges. The plant needed a great deal of renovation after the former owner neglected to invest in upkeep for years. Politically, Escalon explained that as a result of ordinary workers "from below" assuming overall responsibility for running the factory, outside figures dealing with the plant have often failed to give workers recognition and respect. "They practically said to us, 'Get lawyers [to deal with legal or administrative matters], you aren't capable of this.' Well, we showed them otherwise. This is one of

the most successful factories and experiences in Guayana," Escalon said, to murmurs of agreement from around the table.

The legal issue for the workers was that their position ultimately rested upon a temporary decree from the government's labor ministry, even though it had been renewed several times. If the decree was allowed to expire, it would create the possibility of a takeover by a private owner. What the workers wanted was full nationalization: a situation in which the factory was owned by the state to prevent buyout, but run by the workers without interference. As chance would have it, this measure was announced by the government a few days after my December 2011 visit to Graftos. Afterward, the workers said that they were satisfied with the arrangement. Indeed, with continued legal protection from the state, the factory is now running strong under its worker control model.

BOLIVARIAN REVOLUTION

The worker control movement forms one of the most radical social movements in Venezuela, pushing for a transformation of the existing mode of production and class rela-



MOVING LEFT: Thousands of workers and activists march through the capital city of Caracas on May Day 2011. Militant, working class movements have played a key role in radicalizing Venezuela's Bolivarian revolution.

Every three months the factory assembly holds a meeting at which the committees and the company president report back to the general assembly, and the factory trade union can also introduce proposals, for example on pay and conditions.

The key decisions are made in the assembly, and every worker has a voice and a vote. Decisions include buying a bus to transport workers and agreeing on prices for the graphite parts the factory produces for the nationalized Sidor steel plant, Graftos' main client. "It's to say that here, nothing is done without the workers, all the workers have a minimum or maximum level of participation," explained committee member Cesar Barreto. Also, every worker is paid the same salary, from the "president" to the cleaner (before, the factory boss earned 15 times that of a worker), and workers can change positions if they wish, helping to overcome the divide between manual and intellectual labor.

Indeed, the workers feel they have developed a management model that allows workers to organize themselves democratically. "There are other experiences of fellow comrades on the national level, [but] I think

by a sense of common ownership, the workers have been able to increase the rate of production (they informed me in April 2011 that they had just broken their production record). With this, and equal and rising pay enjoyed by each worker, their material quality of life has increased. Workers have, for the first time, managed to get mortgages for houses or own cars, and have enjoyed new benefits such as Christmas bonuses and benefits to buy toys for their children.

In addition to material advancement, there is an improved work environment and less tangible gains, such as a growing sense that the workers are part of a common project linked to the wider industries in the region. "We no longer come just to sell our labor power for eight hours. We're part of a hub that boosts the production of the basic industries [of Guayana] . . . We have raised consciousness, and gained a sense of belonging," said Escalon. Barreto conveyed how the relationship between workers had changed, saying "before there was persecution by the boss. Now there is freedom. The sense of fellowship, in comparison with other companies, has been strengthened." To illustrate their point, the workers recounted

tions, the division and hierarchy of labor, and decision-making within the economy. In fact, the movement has emerged as a political force, helping to spur on Venezuela's Bolivarian revolution, the process of social, political and economic change led by President Hugo Chavez since his election in December 1998.

In 2005, Chavez began to promote the idea of worker control as a means of restoring productivity to factories closed by recalcitrant members of the business class. His initiative, "company closed: company occupied," was part of a left turn by the Bolivarian movement after it defeated numerous destabilization attempts by the country's right-wing opposition, with Chavez announcing in 2005 that the goal of the Bolivarian revolution was the construction of socialism. His government then set about nationalizing strategic sectors of the economy such as telecommunications, energy and food production and promoting grassroots organization through communal councils, among other mechanisms of participation.

Since 2005 more and more factories have been occupied and put under various forms of worker control in Venezuela. Not every model established since 2005 survive, and the process has been fluid and at times uneven, yet the idea of worker control has grown in popularity among Venezuela's working class. Thus, despite the number of factories under worker control representing only a small part of Venezuela's economy, by mid-2011 the Bicentenary Front of Companies Under Worker Control (FRETCO) was able to declare: "The Bolivarian revolution has entered a critical point in which the bourgeoisie has lost control over the exploited. The workers have been acquiring an ever greater level of political consciousness and are organizing themselves to respond to the capitalists' attacks."

KEY BATTLEGROUND

The relationships between the Venezuelan state and different sectors of Venezuela's organized working class have been key factors in Venezuela's worker control movement. Nowhere has this been more marked than in Guayana. This region, sitting alongside the great Orinoco River, enjoys a wealth of natural resources that have spawned a set of heavy industries extracting and manufacturing iron ore, steel, aluminum, bauxite, gold and more. The most strategic of these industries are owned by the state, and the majority are overseen by the government's Venezuela Guayana Corporation (CVG), and the (former) Ministry of Basic Industries and Mining (MIBAM). With around 30,000 workers, the extracting and manufacturing industries is second only to oil in financial clout.

Guayana has become the key battleground for Venezuela's worker control movement over the last three years due to the launch of Plan Socialist Guayana (PGS), a joint project between the Venezuelan state and organized workers in the CVG industries to develop worker control for the entire

state-owned industrial complex in the region. President Chavez supported the plan, uttering his now famous cry "I play on the side of the workers!"

Under the PGS, the aluminum, iron and steel workers of Guayana, working in tandem with the Venezuelan government, were to take direct control of the production of the region's heavy industries. The move would integrate all of the CVG industries into two mega-companies, one comprising

Venezuela's worker control movement demonstrates that workers can collectively self-manage their factories and workplaces without capitalist hierarchies and divisions of labor.

ing the iron and steel production process, the other, the aluminum process. Decision-making would be exercised through factory-floor-level worker councils and various coordinating bodies.

OPPONENTS OF WORKER CONTROL

This endeavor and the wider worker control movement challenge existing power relations and have provoked opposition from a range of groups — from the country's right wing and transnational companies to corrupt or reactionary politicians, mafias, trade union bureaucrats and state managers within the Bolivarian camp.

Members of Venezuelan state institutions, including MIBAM and CVG, have also resisted the implementation of PGS.

Some labor bureaucrats and reformist unions have also opposed PGS. According to pro-PGS activists, this sector of the union movement has employed tactics such as collaborating with state bureaucracies, overtly attacking worker control experiments and setting up alternative "working groups" to



SHOP FLOOR: Workers at the Grafitos del Orinoco factory make a plan.

usurp the process from within. Writer and activist Jorge Martín argues that many union bureaucrats oppose worker control because it undermines the power, privileges and access to key information they enjoy under the current system.

Mafia networks within the basic industries are also resistant to PGS because the greater accountability and openness entailed in the plan threatens their profits from selling contracts and stealing products to sell on the black market. Opposed to any and all

efforts at worker control are the influential multinational corporations that buy primary materials from the CVG companies. This is unsurprising, as the PGS aims to obtain better terms from multinational companies and aspires to reduce exports to transnationals overall.

CONFLICT INTENSIFIES

The conflict over Plan Socialist Guayana (PGS) has intensified in 2012. This reflects

CROSSROADS

The worker control movement in Venezuela, and in Bolívar state in particular, is at a key moment. Progress made by workers threatens those who only support Chavez for personal gain and political opportunism and who see worker control as a threat to their privileges and vested interests. It also undermines those who hold a more restrictive view of what socialism is and argue that workers are not ready to operate factories themselves. Indeed, there are those in the government that hold socialism to be little more than state ownership of industry and central planning from above, with little participation from workers. Regardless, workers at Grafitos del Orinoco and other worker controlled factories continue to develop new systems of power, and several CVG factories are holding elections in order to establish workers' councils. In others, this reactionary faction is successfully undermining the PGS. This is particularly evident in Alcasa, which was considered by many as the most advanced of the CVG factories in implementing the PGS.

The role of President Hugo Chavez has also been contradictory. Through both his discourse and actions, Chavez has given important ongoing institutional and moral

Continued on page 18

CHAVEZ, AGAIN?

Right-wingers from Washington, D.C., to Caracas aren't going to like it, but Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez appears to be headed for another landslide victory in his country's Oct. 7 elections.

Throughout the summer, various polls have consistently shown Chavez leading his conservative opponent Henrique Capriles by 10 to 20 points. In early September, Datánálisis, Venezuela's leading private pollster, projected a Chavez victory with 56 percent of the vote — about equal to his current approval rating.

A victory for Chavez and his "Bolivarian Revolution" (named for Simón Bolívar, a 19th-century independence leader and Venezuelan national hero) would mean a third six-year term in office for the former Army paratrooper.

Chavez has vowed to continue his drive to use Venezuela's vast oil wealth to build a 21st-century socialist society. Earlier this year, he released a detailed roadmap of his plans for 2013 to 2019, which includes bringing more sectors of the economy under public ownership, breaking up large rural landholdings and expanding the role of communal councils, the community-based organizations that carry out many of Chavez's programs on a local level.

"There is no question that the proposal seriously aims to eradicate the old capitalist institutions and market, and replace them with grassroots control and organization and 'alternative' production and distribution methods," writes Tamara Pearson of *Venezuelanalysis.com*

—*Indydependent Staff*

Revolution You Can Dance To

BY IRINA IVANOVA

Most musicians, when they arrive late for a performance, don't expect to find their bandmates sitting on the curb with their hands cuffed behind them. But that's exactly what happened to Rude Mechanical Orchestra (RMO) co-founder Sarah Blust during the protests at the 2004 Republican National Convention in New York City.

The RMO was part of a mass march to Union Square on Aug. 31, 2004, when the NYPD blocked off several entrances and arrested about 20 musicians, says Blust. She came from work to Union Square to see her colleagues "sitting there all on a curb, with their hands behind their backs." Their instruments had been confiscated. Eight hours after the arrests (and two days before they would be released), Blust found the instruments piled on a curb and was able to retrieve them minutes before garbage trucks arrived.

SHAKY BEGINNINGS

Of the RMO's 60-some members, trombonist Blust is the only founding member who's still around. Blust, a Washington, D.C., native who works in women's health, spent the summer of 2004 preparing for the March for Women's Lives.

At one National Abortion Rights Action League (NARAL) organizing meeting Blust was struck by how boring "women's marches" tend to be. "I raised my hand and said I wanted to start a band for the women's

march," she said. "You could have heard a pin drop."

After the meeting, though, another member put Blust in touch with Michele Hardisty, who had proposed a similar idea. "It was like a blind date," says Blust. At the Park Slope Tea Lounge, the women planned a band for the March for Women's Lives and the 2004 Republican National Convention in New York City, for which they recruited through posters, flyers and a lot of time at Bluestockings Bookstore.

From these beginnings, RMO has grown to be a regular on the New York protest scene for the past six years, playing gigs from a Time's Up! ride to a community garden inauguration to a grocery store strike. These days, says Blust, "75 percent of the groups asking for the RMO to play now are because of Occupy."

You know when you see them — not just because of the band's raucous brass, audible from blocks away, but from their outfits of black and Kelly green, usually accessorized with stripes, glitter or fairy wings. But tracking the RMO is a challenge. Like a weather event, they appear abruptly, play furiously and move on. There's no list of upcoming gigs — not on the band's website, nor any publicly accessible calendar (though

TAKE IT TO THE STREETS: Fellow marchers break out into dance with RMO members at the end of the May 12 demonstration in 2011.

when they play an event for another group, the hosts will often publicize it). Sometimes, not even the band knows how many of its members will come to an event.

AUDIENCE AND PLAYERS

To be effectively loud on New York streets, you usually need a loudspeaker, and to use a loudspeaker, you need a permit from the NYPD. If you're planning on playing loud instruments, however, no such limitation exists, and this has made the RMO an essential ingredient in many impromptu demonstrations.

Daniel Flag is a dancer in the RMO's spin-off dance troupe, Tactical Spectacle, which often forms a fluttering entourage around the musicians, dancing in front of playing musicians like a synchronized carpet of snakes, or engaging onlookers.

Flag frequently carries an enormous black flag at the head of an RMO procession, thus the name.

Flag, who had been a long-time admirer of the RMO with many friends in the band, is one of the few band members who was actively recruited. The band has an open-door policy: Anyone with an interest in political ruckus and a sufficiently brassy instrument can join.

Hannah Temple, a teacher and accordionist, first saw the RMO performing at the Queens Pride Parade four years ago. The marches were small, and she was frustrated by the police barricades separating the marchers from the audience.

"I came up to them and

asked if they'd take an accordion," she said.

This led to a heated discussion. The accordion, said Temple, is a difficult instrument. "It's like having a piano in a band." But she stayed.

The RMO's disregard for the distinction between performers and spectators is one reason it's such an adored — and effective — component of protests. Some members describe the RMO's music as a diffusion of violent energy, activating where a protest march can be draining. Another is that (the RNC arrests notwithstanding), police who meet a loud but well-behaved band of fairies and punks are often at a loss for how to behave.

TAKING IT ON THE ROAD

In 2008, when the RMO prepared to attend the Republican National Convention in Minneapolis, they researched transportation options exhaustively. The cheapest way to get 50 members with their instruments to the Midwest, it turned out, was to buy an old school bus retrofitted to run on vegetable oil. (They found one through the Vroom collective.) They made a road trip out of it, stopping in as many places as possible along the way — including Baltimore, Md. and Pittsburgh, Pa.

After their experiences at the New York RNC, RMO members try to avoid "confrontational" events, largely because of the expense of musical instruments. In Minneapolis, they made a partial exception. Flag recalls coming upon members of the Bash Back collective partially surrounded by police. The band danced up to the police and, still playing, escorted the collective members indoors.

"The RMO made me realize I'm not interested in going to protests as an individual," said Temple. "In other parts of my life, individuality was power."

PROCESS POINTS

For cofounder Michele Hardisty, "The fact that anybody can play music is a political



ANDY STERN



IRINA IVANOVA

MAKING A RUCKUS: Rude Mechanical Orchestra members march down Broadway to join striking workers at the Strand bookstore last May Day.

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statement about ownership of culture.”

New members pair up with a buddy to help them integrate into the band, which can mean learning the consensus process and how to avoid burnout. There’s a lot of work behind the marches’ ebullient joy. The band practices every Tuesday night, holds additional sectional rehearsals as needed, and meets once a month to talk about organizational issues.

This is in addition, of course, to actually playing events, which can number up to four a week. During citywide actions, the band can play a half-dozen gigs in one day.

The band’s leaders and logistics planners are volunteered by their peers on a gig-by-gig basis. This includes both the members who coordinate the event’s logistics with the host organization (“captains”) and those who march at the front of the band and determine its course at the event itself (“majorettes”). For trombonist Meredith Slopen, this structure means “we can have leadership without authority.”

The band makes most decisions by consensus, including which performance requests to accept and whether to admit instruments that are unconventional for a marching band. (The RMO has played host to a banjo and two violins.) An electric guitar and bagpipes are two instruments that never made it in, but came close.

“This band loves process,” Blust said. In fact, the RMO has helped with process and structure for several of the many radical brass bands that have popped up across America in the eight years since the New York City RNC.

CONTINUING EDUCATION

There is a challenge defining themselves, as a band, and as a political group. Mostly the RMO tries to make organizing fun — not just at the peak of a demonstration, but in the day-to-day work. They see this as a crucial part of their mission of keeping activists sane. The RMO doesn’t teach or advocate specific politics, instead working as an ally of a range of activist groups.

The equal emphasis on politics and musicianship can be a liability. “We have a hard time keeping very good musicians interested,” said Blust. On the other hand, a few current members have learned to play an instrument in order to join the band. How does this happen? “Slowly,” says Temple. She herself has taken up the baritone horn since joining.

There are also band members for whom the RMO is the “fun” project between other political engagements. Others have left the band to return to graduate school (a major competitor of the band, according to Blust), and occasionally to focus

their efforts on specific local campaigns. Band members come and go with enough frequency that there’s an official process for going “on hiatus.”

The only known member to have left the band for career reasons is the banjo player, who’s completing a medical residency in New Orleans.

WHY PLAY?

John Bell, founder of the HONK! Festival, an annual gathering of activist street bands in Massachusetts, explained in a documentary why musical protest is so powerful: “You don’t need electricity, you don’t need a computer, you don’t need internet access, you don’t need a lot of money.” You don’t need a sound permit from the NYPD. You just go out there and play.

But money does play an uneasy role. The band has certain expenses, such as renting a rehearsal space, that are shared by all members. Other outlays — music lessons for individual members, for example — are not covered collectively.

While the band does encourage those groups that can to pay the band for performances — for example, if they’re asked to perform at a fundraiser — payment is not a strong factor in the decision to play an event. Any money the band earns goes into the general fund.

“We try not to be the free band you can hire because you don’t want to hire musicians,” said Temple. The RMO has counted professional musicians among its members, and many band members are particularly sensitive to avoid taking work from musicians.

Several years ago, the RMO was asked to play a festival in central Brooklyn. A few days after accepting, they were contacted by a local band that had originally been hired to play at the event. The festival organizers backed out of the contract, thinking the RMO would be cheaper. After learning about the cancellation, the RMO refused the engagement.

COMMUNITY

Friendship with dozens of RMO members is one thing that’s kept Sarah Blust in New York through several urges to move away. It’s one way, she said, to “justify the rent I pay.”

“Nobody ever really leaves the RMO,” says Blust. Though she’s the only founding member who’s still active in the band, most of the others have stayed in the city and they see each other frequently.

She added, “If I moved, it would have to be to another city with a band.”

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LEO GARCIA

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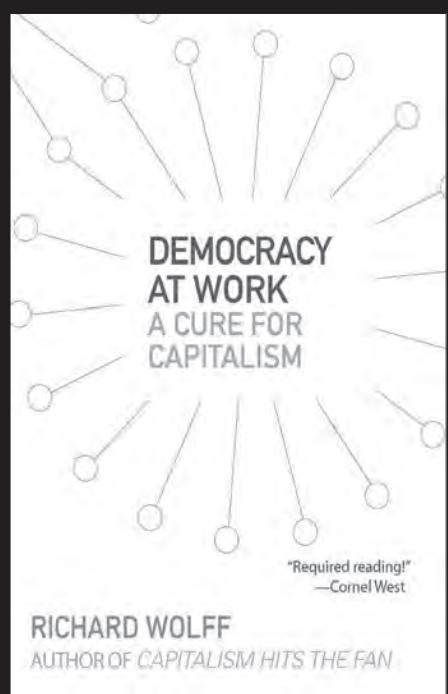
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Twilight of the Elites
BY CHRISTOPHER HAYES
CROWN PUBLISHERS, 2012

The word "meritocracy" was originally intended as a satirical term. The British sociologist Michael Young coined it in 1958 to describe a dystopian future society where social position was strictly determined by intelligence. On this side of the pond, however, we aspire to Young's dystopia. The notion that wealth and power are doled out based on hard work and aptitude more than luck or inheritance is one of the central myths that justifies skyrocketing inequality. Given the mantra of equality of opportunity, to even talk of inequality of outcomes is to engage in a politics of envy or class warfare.

In *Twilight of the Elites*, Christopher Hayes explores the brave new world of our meritocratic elites. One of the book's central themes is the corruption of meritocratic selection mechanisms by elites seeking to pass on their status to their progeny. The mechanisms are myriad, from better schools and after-school tutoring to old-fashioned personal connections and donations. In Hayes' paraphrase of Robert Michels, a German sociologist who wrote about the tendency of complex organizations to turn into oligarchies despite the intentions of their members, "he who says meritocracy says oligarchy." The relatively few members of the elite with rags-to-riches stories serve in part to convince those born on third base of how impressive it is that they made it to home plate.

A second theme is the myriad failures of elites over the past decade — most notably the financial

crisis — and their collective refusal to take accountability for their actions. Hayes argues this behavior has given rise to a decade-long "crisis of authority" that is at the root of much of the outrage of both the Tea Party and the Occupy Movement. While his periodization is questionable — there has been talk of a "crisis of authority" since Watergate, if not the Enlightenment — it is striking that instead of financial executives donning prison jumpsuits or surrendering their stock options, they're continuing to collect multi-million dollar salaries.

Hayes cites Karen Ho's fascinating ethnography of investment bankers, *Liquidated: An Ethnography of Wall Street*, to argue that those in the financial sector have internalized the notion that their outsize paychecks are just compensation for their oversized brains. In short, according to Hayes, not only has meritocracy been corrupted by elites, it is also corrupting of elites. The embarrassment of knowing that their wealth was owed to an accident of birth historically shamed aristocrats into a sense of owing something to the rest of society, but meritocrats feel no such obligation.

While Hayes' linkage between a meritocratic ethos and elite failure is perhaps a promising narrative for political mobilization across the ideological spectrum, the connections he makes are intellectually sloppy. As a rule, elites attempt to defend their privileges and pass them on to their children. Hayes fails to convincingly argue that there is something distinctive about the meritocratic ethos that underlies the failures of judgment and refusal to take responsibility of American elites. The problem

is perhaps not so much with meritocracy as with the social distance and inequality that is a key characteristic of all oligarchies.

Hayes correctly insists that the only way we can have greater equality of opportunity is if we have greater equality of outcomes. Nonetheless, he retains a far too rosy view of the democratic possibilities of meritocracy. In the chapter he devotes to his alma mater, Hunter College High School, he suggests that when he attended the school in the late 1990s, it was nearly the ideal of meritocracy. Hayes paints a picture of a simpler time, when it was still unheard of for prospective students' parents to hire tutors and enroll their children in expensive test prep classes. But even before Kaplan or Princeton Review existed, the financial, intellectual and cultural capital of parents still played a major role in whether their children succeeded in gaining entrance to selective public schools. Affluent parents tend to engage in a "concerted cultivation" mode of child-rearing, bringing all their resources to bear in order to ensure the success of their offspring. Private tutoring accentuates inequalities, but it is hardly the sole vector by which inequality is reproduced.

We have indeed been failed by really existing meritocracy, but Hayes is naïve to think that the solution is to work for a more genuinely meritocratic society. It is time instead to abandon the notion of meritocracy as a legitimating myth for inequality. In the absence of substantive equality, equality of opportunity can only be a mirage.

— MATT WASSERMAN



An *Encounter with a Flowering Season*, 2009.

COURTESY OF WHITNEY MUSEUM

Polka-Dot Protest

Yayoi Kusama
WHITNEY MUSEUM OF AMERICAN ART
945 MADISON AVE.
THROUGH SEPT. 30

Burn Wall Street...Wall Street men must stop all of this fake ‘business.’ Obliterate Wall Street men with polka-dots on their naked bodies.” This appeal wasn’t written on a sign at Zuccotti Park last fall — it was part of a press release penned by artist and writer Yayoi Kusama to help promote her “naked protest” outside of the New York Stock Exchange in 1968.

These “happenings” usually featured Kusama painting polka dots on protesters’ naked bodies in an attempt to bring attention to the antiwar movement.

Born in Japan in 1929, Kusama has long been a fringe-y figure. Her work has included a variety of mediums, such as painting, sculpture, fashion and performance. However, recent years have found her profile soaring into the upper reaches of international art world stardom, and a retrospective of her life’s work, entitled *Yayoi Kusama*, at the Whitney Museum is the latest chapter in this journey.

Kusama has made cogent, often pioneering work out of some of the biggest high-art ideas of the last 60 years — abstract expressionism, pop art, social happenings, psychoanalytical self-realization — all while managing to remain true to herself. Kusama’s art is about the life-giving “obliterations” of nature and the cosmos, a vision that was at its height in her youthful “infinity net” paintings. These large, abstract works (with names like *No. AB* and *No. B White*, both from 1959) gather simple little circles into unpredictable bouts of psychic distress or oceanic calm. Kusama is known for her fidelity to particular forms — the dot, the sphere, the phallus — but Kusama’s art is about more than just repetition. At its best, the power of her work comes from a neurotic yet cathartic place: a priestess communing with demons through an obsessive (or to use her term, “obsessional”) devotion.

Kusama’s protest events are a small but

significant part of her Whitney retrospective. Sadly, the show doesn’t have anything from her Wall Street action in 1968, but it does include other highlights of her activism from the same year. There’s a photo of her Brooklyn Bridge “antiwar naked happening and flag burning,” as well as a letter to President Richard Nixon that she read aloud in front of the New York Board of Elections in 1968. In her appeal, she offers to have sex with Nixon in exchange for the end of the Vietnam War: “...truth is written in spheres with which I will lovingly, soothingly, adorn your hard masculine body. Gently! Gently! Dear Richard. Calm your manly fighting spirit!” That same year, Kusama presided over what she claimed was the first-ever gay wedding in United States, with the two grooms united in a single, dot-strewn costume of her own design.

Within the late-’60s counterculture, Kusama found a way to harness social upheaval through her own unique, personal expression. Her celebrations of freedom and universal oneness emerged out of a crisis, the human body used as an imperialist tool in Vietnam. It can be freeing to think of these protests as actual works of art. But, there’s something creepy about protest movements being siphoned through a single person’s endeavors. Kusama was seeking liberation and truth, but she was also looking for publicity and money.

Kusama is an inveterate self-mythologizer, positioning herself as a countercultural doyenne and a sort of disturbed, mystical genius. Some late-’60s flyers for her “Body Festivals” feature an image of Kusama as a cartoonish logo and, this July, Louis Vuitton released a collection of Kusama-inspired, polka-dot fashion accessories (the fashion house is also one of the exhibit’s sponsors). With these projects, Kusama becomes more than just a myth: she turns herself into a brand.

Kusama’s “happenings” get at the essence of the meaning of protest — the human body in public space, channeling the frighteningly vast potentialities of freedom, dignity and love. At cosmic levels, change involves creation and destruction and Kusama’s work shows us that protest (along with art) is a chance to feel that change within ourselves. Or, as she put it in a public performance from 1991: “...we become part of the unity of our environment, I become part of the eternal, and we obliterate ourselves in love.”

— MIKE NEWTON

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Venezuela

Continued from page 13

support for the PGS and worker control in general, and it is not for nothing that he enjoys strong support among worker control activists. However, Chavez has also made decisions in response to differing political pressures and depending on the balance of forces in a particular situation. In light of the presidential elections on Oct. 7 (see sidebar), and an opposition united behind candidate Henrique Capriles Radonski, it is quite possible that Chavez has his eye focused on the strategic objective of keeping the right-wing opposition out of power.

ANOTHER WORLD IS POSSIBLE

The worker control movement is one part of a varied and exciting process under way in Venezuela, encompassing community councils; communes; community media; women's, LGBT, afro-descendent and indigenous groups; and radical government policies domestically and internationally, from social programs to solidarity-based international alliances such as the Alliance for the Bolivarian Peoples of our America. The political spaces available to push the worker control movement forward will be determined not only by workers' ability to organize and

struggle but also by the general direction the revolution takes in the coming months and years.

Based on what has been achieved so far, Venezuela's worker control movement demonstrates to the world that workers can indeed collectively self-manage their factories and workplaces, and that capitalist hierarchies and divisions of labor are not the only, nor best, way of organizing economic life. Running production in a collective democratic manner addresses problems of workers' alienation from their labor and the unfair distribution of produced resources, while leading to the greater education and consciousness of workers. Such a model can also benefit society as a whole, as production is geared toward the needs of society and not profit for capitalists, and lays the basis for deeper economic and social transformation. In the context of austerity being imposed by the elite across Europe and North America as a result of the latest crisis of capitalism, worker control in Venezuela is another example of not only how another, better, world is possible, but also what that world could look like.

Ewan Robertson is a journalist and activist based in Mérida, Venezuela. This article is adapted from a longer version that originally appeared on venezuelanalysis.com.



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